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A Blue Bluejacket's

Letters Home, 1863-64

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Volume I OCTOBER, 1928 Number 4

THE NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY

An Historical Review of New England Life and Letters

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tans to his will, and use kings for his purpose, as a bluff, simple seaman with a touch of piety. With amazing lack of humor he clothed the sailor's rough neck in imperial purple, with a dog-Latin title of "Phippius Maximus." We may thank Mather, as doubtless did the reading public of his day, for a lively account in racy Saxon English of Phips's treasure-hunt, and the shipwreck on Anticosti; but we have had to dig deep in dusty archives to discover the very human, likeable, and essentially modern adventurer that was William Phips.

P 20381

MEMORANDA AND DOCUMENTS

A BLUE BLUEJACKET'S LETTERS HOME, 1863–1864

EDITED BY ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER

These letters of a Civil War veteran differ from others that have attained the dignity of print. They add nothing to our knowledge of large events or great personalities or of the grand strategy of the conflict. Yet they possess a very special, indeed almost unique, interest for a generation which has come to think of the common soldiers and sailors in the great struggle merely as integers in the statistical summaries which historians give of the size of the fighting forces. If the unsung author of these letters fails to present a bird's-eye view of the war, he amply makes amends by giving us something that is of greater human interest —an ant's-eye view.

The tale unfolded by these letters is that of a lad from the rural parts of Maine who, after fighting in two battles, acquired a hearty distaste for the army and straightway quit the service without further ado or formality. Undisciplined and ignorant as he was, the war had somehow or other got a hold on his emotions and, though he could never quite understand why, he signed up, under an assumed name, as fireman on board the U. S. S. *Iron Age* in August, 1863. "I pitty the fellow that goes for a soger," he writes in the first letter of the group, adding in his next, "I like a bluddy fool went and shipped" in the navy.

His correspondence tells of his various war experiences, ranging from the hazards of the blockading service to pitched battles with his fellow seamen. He keeps a nostalgic eye on affairs in his little Maine village. "I suppose you have a good time in the woods," he writes. "I expect you go out hunting once in a while dont you." He believes "things will look odd" on his return, with a new stable and all, and the thought of a meal at home reminds him that he never gets enough to eat on shipboard—"if I get much thinner it will take two of us to make

one shader." He expresses warm approval of his brother Jim's aspiration to evade the draft. "Yet," he could write, "I am an altred boy from what I was once." As his term of service approaches a close, his old impatience begins to irk him once more. "I long to be my own master again to go whare I like and do as I like . . . . if I had my way I would cut every nigers throt in the united states;" and in his concluding letter, with forty-eight days yet to serve, he announces, "I am going on a regular tare when my time is up."

The vessel on which he saw most service was the U. S. S. *Nansemond*, a side-wheel wooden steamer of 340 tons' burden, formerly the *J. F. Freeborn*, which the government had purchased from a New York owner on August 18, 1863.[1] She was a small, fast, low-pressure craft well suited for duty in the shallow North Carolina inlets where some of the most effective blockade running of the Confederacy was being done. Of her usefulness Captain B. F. Sands of the U. S. S. *Dacotah* declared in a report of October 21, 1863, to Acting Rear Admiral S. P. Lee, commanding the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron: "I cannot say too much in favor of such vessels as the *Nansemond* and *Niphon*, with their energetic commanding officers, for blockading purposes. Give us a few such and we will put a stop to this nefarious British trade and make Wilmington a closed port."[2] Her commander was Lieutenant R. H. Lamson, formerly of the *Minnesota*.

Permission to print these letters could be secured only on condition that the writer's name and all marks of identification be removed. Fortunately the letters bear their own credentials of authenticity, and from the standpoint of social history little is lost by their anonymity. The spelling and punctuation of the letters remain as in the original.

1863

Baltimore November the 28th

Dear Cousin I now take my pen in hand to rite you a few lines to let you no that I am well and in good

[1] *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, ser. 2, i, 154.
[2] *Ibid.*, ser. 1. ix, 248.

helth and I hope these few lines will find you the same I am now in baltimore in the U S S nancemond we are in here for repairs we came here the 22 of nov I dont now how long we shall stay here but we have got 15 days liberty we can come abord when we like and go ashore when we like we are all having a good tine you must excuse me for not riting sooner when I [went away] from your house I went to boston and shiped in the navy on bord the steammer Iron age[3] and went down to wilininton on the blockade and was transferd to the nansemond I was down tere about 3 monts the nansmond is a little side wheal steamer she was a new york tug boat once she is the fastest one on the blockade I supose you have seen acounts of her in the papers we have destroid two blockade runers[4] and captured one the margret & jessey[5] of corse you herd about it so you see we have some prise money coming to us it will bee devided between us and the key stone state I surpose I

[3] The U. S. S. *Iron Age*, a screw steamer of 424 tons' displacement, commissioned at Boston on June 25, 1863. *Ibid.*, ser. 2, i, 109.

[4] These were the outgoing Confederate steamer *Douro*, bound for Nassau "with a very valuable cargo," which was destroyed on the night of October 11, 1863, and the *Venus*, "said to be the best blockade runner and fastest in the trade," on its way from Nassau to Wilmington with a cargo of lead, drugs, drygoods, bacon and coffee, which was destroyed in the early morning of October 21. *Ibid.*, ser. 1. ix, 232–234, 248–250, 774.

[5] The side-wheel steamer *Margaret and Jessie* of Charleston, S. C., bound from Nassau to Wilmington, was captured on November 5, 1863, after a chase in which the *Nansemond*, *Niphon*, *Keystone State*, *Howqua* and *Fulton* took part, the last being an army transport on her way from New Orleans to New York. The *Nansemond's* flag was the first to be hoisted on the prize, and the commander of the *Keystone State* as the senior officer within signal distance prepared to take possession. But the master of the *Fulton* vigorously asserted his claims, placed a crew on board and proceeded to tow her to New York. The *Margaret and Jessie* had run the blockade fifteen times. *Ibid.*, ser. 1, ix, 262–268.

dont no how much thare will be a pece the draft [is] scaring peeple here I surpose ther are drafting down there now I hope that none of the boys will be drafted for I pitty the fellow that goes for a soger I expect that Jim is at home tell him if he is to look out for the draft I suppose that Old Cox would like to make 30 dolars on me[6] but I gues he wont this year

I shiped coal passer it is hard work but I gues that I can stand it I am onley shiped for one year I am on my 4 monts now I have shifted my name around a little when I shiped I gave my name a George E Arnold that is all rite it came hard to arncer that name at first but I am al rite now there is a lot of our crew ben taken up as deserters all redy I want you to rite and tel me all the news tell jim if he is at home tell him to rite you need not be afraid to rite onley direct your letters to George E arnold and it will be all rite if you direct the other way there will be mischief if you direct them the way I told you it will bee al rite now rembeer I surpose that folks say that that George is a queere fellow let them talk I know my biz I had my picter taken the other day and I guess that I will send it to you it ant a very good one but you will look over that I had a chew of tobaco in my mouth as usual I think that I will nock of riting soon for I an giting tired I hope that you will excuse bad riting and dirty paper give my best respects to al the folks so I will bid you good by . . . .

[6] Under an order of September, 1863, this was the amount of money paid to recruiting officers for each deserter they arrested. F. A. Shannon, *The Organization and Administration of the Union Army* (Cleveland, 1928), ii, 84.

Fortres. Monroe. Va. December. 29th 1863
Dear Brother I now take my pen in hand to rite a few lines to let you no that I am well and in good helth it is some time since we met but I hope that we shal meat again some time a nother I supose that you no whare I am that I am in the navy I like a bluddy fool went and shipped I could not let well enough alone so I went and shipped I shipped in boston on bord of the Iron age and went down to wilimington on the blockade I stayed in her a spel and then I volentered to go in the nansemond whare I had the fun of destroing two vessels and taking another and then we went to baltimore for repars we got 15 days liberty the[y] got her repaired and started out again we gut as fur as cape hatres and had a little [trouble?] and had to put back into hamton roads and [they] shuved us aboarb of the old store ship brandywine [where] I am yet[7] they are all drafted but three of us I expect every day to be drafted I shant be sorrey when it comes that is if I get on a good boat when I shiped I shiped under the name of George E Arnold and if you rite direct it so and I shall get it i wish that I was with you working in the woods I think it would be much better than going to sea Hester told me that you had cut your foot i am sorry for it we have all got trials and tribulations to bear for this is a hard world you no at eney rate you and I have had it bout as hard as they everage but I hope that we shal come out all rite yet I am an altred boy from what I was once I have ben

[7] The U. S. S. *Brandywine* was a wooden frigate of 1708 tons' burden, built some years before the war and used as a storeship at the Norfolk Navy Yard during the war. *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, ser. 2, i, 47.

through meny a danger since I saw you and expect to go through meny more but it is no use to bid the devel good morning till you meat him I surpose you have a good time in the woods I expect you go out hunting once in a while dont you

I had a letter from ———[8] to day she said that ant Eunice was very sick and she gave me your adres so I thaught I would set down and rite to you an I hope that you will do the same when you git this I expect you think I dun rong when I left the army but I dont I think I served them just rite I was in two battles and came near dying twice and they would not discharge me and then I could not be contented but must ship in the navy I will soon be out again if nothing happens which hope thare will not if I do they never get me to go again my time is out next august I have come acrost an old fellow that was shipmates with uncel jim in the north-carliner I want you to rite and til me all about the country up whare you are tell me all [about] your years cruse in the Ino[9] and how you came out about the prise you took I have got prise money to me but I dont no as I will ever get enny or not I would like to get it I am begining to think that it is pretty near time to nock off so I will bid you good by for this time rite as soon as you get this but beshure and direct it to George E Arnold do not forget

Beaufort Feb the 6th 1864

Dear Cousin I now take my pen in hand to anser your letter that I rescieved on the 11 of last nomth

[8] His girl cousin to whom the previous letter was written.

[9] The U. S. S. *Ino*, a clipper ship of 895 tons' displacement, left New York on May 29, 1863, "to cruise upon the equator in search of the piratical vessels *Alabama* and *Florida*." After covering a distance of nearly fourteen thousand miles, she returned to New York on September 7 without having met up with them. *Ibid.*, ser. 1, ii, 441; ser. 2, i, 108.

I would haved rote before but I could not for we was bissey giting the brandywine from fort monroe up to norfork and on the 16th the nansemond came down and I had to go in her we started out that night for beaufort we had a very plesant pasage till we got of beaufort and it came in fogy and so we came to an anchor that night and in the morning it comenst to blow it blew so hard that we could not git in over the bar and so we lade there till about 3 oclock in the after noon when we had to git under way for we could not stay there eney longer for it was bloing a gale of wind and the sea was was coming over fore and aft and so we had to put to sea and run very slow to give her time to ride the sea which was runing mountains high the gale continured all that night till morning when it begun to lull about 8 oclock in the morning it was good wether again and we shaped our course for beaufort and got in there in the after noon[10] and we took in coal and went down to wiliming-ton on the blockade we had very fine wether thare we stade there till we got out of coal and then we came back to beaufort whare we took in coal again and was all reddy to go out when we had a dispach to go up to a place caled carline citty for the rebs was coming to take beaufort[11] so up we went and anchord of brest of the town and towards night there was hevy firing about 4 miles of we could see the smoak plaine from whar we lay the firing seased about dark we was expecting them to come every minet we was all reddy for them they had drove our pickets in and we new nothing about it and there we was and the rebs was on the beach before we new

[10] The official report in *ibid.*, ser. 1, ix, 385, is less exciting.

[11] The official accounts of this fighting appear in *ibid.*, ser. 1, ix, 455–456, 466–467, 478.

Enny thing about it and about 12 that night a dispach came for us to retreat down the river and we did so in turning around we run aground and there we was fast aground and they migint [*sic*] have bloud us out of water if they had ben amine to for it was some time before we could git off we went down towards beaufort in the morning evry thing seemed to be all quiet and so to day we have gorn up the river again whar we was before I guess that they have gorn back again I wish that we would stay here till spring for I like it better than on the blockade for we dont have much to do excuse me for not riting before I have not had a letter from jim yet when you rite to jim give him my directions for I dont think that he got my letter for I have rote two letters to him and I have not got an anser yet you can rite enny time that you are amind to and I shall get them no matter whar I am so that the vesels name is on them tell howard that he must rite rite when ever you have a mind to

U. S. Steamer. Nansemond.
Beaufort N C
April 10th 1864

Cousin ——[12] I now take my pen in hand to rite you a few lines to let you no that I am still in the land of the living I am well and hope these few lines will find you the same. it is sunday and we are laying in beaufort harbor we came in last night we shall probly lay here ten days to pach the boilar for it is leaking very badly. it is very near plaid out we shal go home about the first of may I think I dont expect to go home in her I shall get transfered to a nother boat if I can. we towed

[12] This letter and the following two are addressed to a male cousin.

a slop [sloop?] from the blockade that was took of nassau the 20 of march. She started for boston she got to the nothad [northward] of cape hatras twise and was blown of again she was out in three gailes and in the last one they lost all their sailes and there they was at the mirsey of the wind and wave drifting wharever the wind mint blow them they drifted till she got with in two [miles?] of the mouth of the river that goes up to wilimington it was in the night or we would have seen her it was dark and one of our boats was in pretty clost to the fort and saw her and that it was a blockade runner and took her and that she had ben taken before we have had very bad wether through march but the wether is geting better now I have had two fights latly one with the quarter gunner and I had one with Engineers yoman this morning and I didnot get whiped eather time the first one I just puntch till he was glad to give it up the other one his friends took his part or I would have nocked seven bels out of him I tell you ——— I am rate on the mussel theys git mistaken when [they] think of whiping me not that I am braging i never interfear with enney one except they comense it most all of the fellows are ashore to day I would not for there is nobody but nigars ashore here beaufort is a great old place new york cant hold a candel to this place I tell you the houses are twice as thick as they are in new york I came neer giting lost there one time wall to tell you the troth there is about seven acers of land between everys house there is another place rate opersit call morehead citty that is worser still and another citty it has two dweling houses and about three niger shanties and a few sheads I believe that the citty is inhabited by one old niger woman this

place is caled careline citty I expect there will be a draft down in maine and you must keep the dores and winders shet to keep out the draft I want you to send me some papers that is if you are amind to send enney kind that you are amind to I dont care what I expect that jim will be at home before long tell him to rite as soon as he does if you think there is enny danger by posting your letters at —— —— dont do it tell ——[13] that I got her letter and would like to anser it but I guss that I wont she said that you and Howard were going to build a stable I dont see whare you are going to poot it I expect things will look odd when I come back I suppose you are framing it now I can Immagen how things is I wish that I was going to take tea with you to night I think that I would have something better than hot watter and spoons for supper that all we get for one I am neer starved if I get much thinner it will take two of us to make one shader how are you hard tack give my love to all enquiring friends and especely the pretty girls if there is enney there is not meny about there that noes me if you ever find this out you must rite I would like to get a letter every maill if I could it makes the time pass so much smother I am so hungry that I cant rite much more I dont expect that you can read half what i have rote so I will belay or come to an anchor so good by I hope that you will excuse ill composed letter

U S Steamer Nansemond
May 15th 1864.

Cousin —— I receved your letter and was glad to hear from you we are in beaufort agane we

[13] His girl cousin and the recipient's sister.

came in five days ago we did not go to the blockade as soon as we expected to for we had to go up bogue sounds becaus they expeted that the rebs was coming to take this place we stayed up there a spell and then went on the blockade we stayed there a spell without enney thing ocuring worth menshioning till the other night we had a little confab with the rebble ram we was lying on the bar as usual when the hawkwar [*Howquah*] a gun boat saw us and mistook us for a blockade runner which is often the case and let drive at us and just cleared our pilot house and bursted rate along side and then we signlised to her and found that it was one of our boats it was rather dark and we could not see a great wayes. in about two hours after that we saw a vessel pretty clost to us we didnot no [whether it was one] of our boats or not or whether it was a blockade runner or not we could not tell we sigenlised to her and she woud not ancer us pretty soon she showed a red lite and made towards us we saw then what she was we knew it was usles to stand and fight her so we fired a couple shots at her and then turned tale and was soon out of site of her in the dark in the morning we had it again [st] us and the hawkwar none of the other boats would come near the hawkwar got a shot through her smoak stack and the ram went in again and hasent ben out again as I no of and I hope she wont the gatersburg [*Gettysburg*] came in here yesterday she is the one that we helped to take her mame was margret and jessey she is a splended vessel of about 500[tons] [14] I got one paper the maine farmer we have got news that grant has got petersburg and is going into richmond I hope it is so you said you wer going to begin to

[14] Her tonnage was 950. *Ibid.*, ser. 2, i, 95.

plant in about a weak if so you have comensed before now I wish that I was with you I long to be my own master again to go whare I like and to do as I like I dont like to be a slave nor I never will be a gain this is worse than slavery a blody site if I had my way I would cut every nigers throt in the united states they think more of a niger on this boat than they do of a white man I dont supose you beleave that do you they even poot them over white men —— dont never speak in favor of a moke if you knew as much about them as I do you would not we hant going home so much as we was and I hope that she wont go home till the first of July or the first of august ask jim what the reason he dont rite I supose there is good wages this summer I no if i was out of this I could git my cool $40 a month to go fireman on some vessel that so but then a man erns it for it is hard hot work I will tell you how it feels in the fire room of a hot day you can immagen how a crab would feal in a pot of hot watter thats the way I feal It is about time that I came to an anchor I guess I hope that uncle dudley will excuse these few lines If I could rite as well as you I would not call old abe my uncle give my best respects to all rite as soon as you get this

Norfork. V. A.
July the 6th [1864]

Cousin —— I will try and anser your letter I am well and hope you are the same we are now laying at gosport navy yard we shall lay here 10 dayes and prehaps longer they wont let us go to baltimore where we expected to go when we started they think that she can stand it a while longer altho

she has a new boiler in baltimore wating for her we cant carry onley 15 lbs of steam for the boiler is very weak we have patched it so much that it is nearly all patches I supose you are haying by this time I dreamed that I was to your house last [night?] thort that you was haying and that you was plaid out I hope it is not so. you asked me when my time was out I will tell you I have 48 dayes from to day and I shant be sorrey when that has gorn I am going on a regular tare when my time is up I have got 150 green backs do me now do you mind that when the boat gave a role you said that jim was going to invade the draft bulley for him I hope you wont get drafted if you no whare jim has gorn let us know you said that Eunice was marid I am glad of it you must rite and tell me who she is spliced to and whare he lives and what he does for a living tell us what kind of a time you had on the 4. I was coming around around Hatters about that time I did not forget the time we had 6 monts ago. by they way I will excuse that half sheat of paper if you wont do so enney more. the time that the ram came out we kiled 6 mem on bord of her the second shot we fired went in her port hole it was us for we was all that fired at her that night the howqua fired at her in the morning she is destroid now if the cales [Calais?] youth had ben there she never would have gorn in again you dont know who I mean it is capain Cushon I suppose you have hurd of him he is a brick we have ben on an expedition sence I rote last up to a place cald sneaze ferry about 8 miles from the mouth of the river we had a detachment of the 9 vt umder captain kelley the luckest man in the service for that kind of h bisnes

we captured their pickets and held the ferry til our caverly from neerburn [Newbern] made a rade up some whare I dont no whare but when they came back they made a mistake and fired in to our men at the ferrey and the vermonters gave them fits you see it in the papers I will bid you good by for this time . . . .

BOOK REVIEWS

The Petty Papers. Some unpublished writings of Sir William Petty from the Bowood Papers. Edited by the Marquis of Lansdowne. 2 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1927. Pp. lv, 585. $12.00.)

Of all the remarkable figures of the "great century," that is to say the seventeenth, none is more extraordinary than Sir William Petty. There was not, according to Evelyn, "a better Latin poet living, when he gives himself to that diversion; nor is his excellence less in Council and prudent matters of state . . . . nor in the whole world his equal for a superintendent of manufacture and improvement of trade, or to govern a plantation. If I were a Prince I should make him my second councellor at least." "Above all," wrote Pepys, of a brilliant company in which he once found himself, "I do value Sir William Petty;" and the editor of these papers puts Aubrey's estimate of him, "a person of an admirable inventive head and practical parts" at the beginning of his book. In the language of his century, Petty was pre-eminently an "ingenious man." He made the best survey of Ireland; he accomplished the impossible task of dividing her lands among their many claimants in the Cromwellian period; he invented a variety of machines; he conceived the idea which bore fruit in the Royal Society; he was a doctor, a professor, a valued royal councillor, a good man of business, and the father of what used to be called political economy, a statistician, a tax expert, and an eminent economic theorist; and so good a fellow and so delightful a companion that Charles II not merely forgave him for his attachment to the Commonwealth but knighted him and would have made him a privy councillor had it not been for the collapse of Temple's plan for the reorganization of the Council.

He was a remarkable man, for, largely devoid of those arts by which shrewder and more cunning individuals rise in the world, with or without merit, he owed his place in life to one of the

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